

Before the advent of white men, secret societies

played a tremendous part in the social structure of those fierce warriors who inhabited the Queen Charlotte Islands - located in the rugged north western coast of British Columbia.

Many villages of other Indian nations from the cold coast of Alaska to the warm southern region of the Oregon seaboard felt the fury of these savage raiders when their seventy foot canoes swopt into view. Those Lords of the Coast feared nothing except the secret societies that existed among them.

Two men that composed these secret societies were made up only of the dite in Haida nobility. To qualify for this most jealously guarded clique, the chosen candidate must be of noble birth with an unblotched background. The selected man must have on both sides of his family aristocratic blood as far back as they could trace. This was done by interpreting the history of the family Gau-Gungai, or, as they are known today - totem poles. These tall carved columns of cedar, ranging up to sixty feet in length, were not objects of worship, as commonly supposed, but simply a carved history of the owner's ancestors. On this ancestral totem pole, coat-of-arms were carved the deeds of prowess and glory that stretched down from the dim past to the present possessor's latest exploit of courage that was considered worthy enough to be honoured by immortalizing his feat on a totem pole. A Gaa-Gungai was first carved in miniature, then submitted to the ruling chief and his councillors. If they were satisfied that the carved history was authentic, the erector was given permission to carve and raise a pole to a specified length that the chief decreed. The secret society men who delved into the history of the chosen candidate carried out an exhaustive research of the young man's family Gaa-Gungai.

Several reasons could disqualify him through no fault of his own. One such barrier, was if any of his ancestors had been captured in battle and made a slave. In their eyes, it was better to die by one's own hand rather than submit to the

indignities of slavery in the hands of lesser people. When in battle, if his capture was certain, a nobleman was faced with the hard choice of being captured alive, to die by his own hand, or charge into the certain death of a curtain of enemy arrows - and thus retain his status and that of his descendants. Very few of the Haida nobility were taken prisoner. To those born of high blood, honour had no price tag. However, if one was captured under circumstances beyond his control, he could be ransomed with trade goods - set exactly according to his rank. On his release, he would resume his rank in his clan. By the very fact of having been captured, neither he nor his descendants would ever be admitted into a secret society. These harsh standards governed a Haida nobleman's conduct in battle, and he was ever conscious of his duty to the generations that would follow him.

The secret society scrutineers who searched into the young man's background and history were especially careful in seeking a peculiar stigma known as "Algwa", or Marked with the Paddle Brand. This stain was deadly in its meaning. This blot of dishonour was brought about in bloody clan feuds, of which there were many among the Haidas.

If one clan had killed a nobleman of the opposing clan, and by the fortunes of war the clan which had killed the nobleman were conquered, the victorious faction demanded full indemnity for their slain nobleman. The ancient law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was carried out in the fullest sense of the word. This claim, when paid, was done by one of two methods. The first was by direct payment of the slain man's worth and potential value, as set by established precedents. The scale of value in trade goods was reckoned by so many copper plaques, which were held as a high monetary measure of wealth among the Haidas; a certain number of canoes hewn to a specified length - with the conquering clan's crest carved on each vessel; surrounding of an allotted number of slaves, both male and female; relinquishing parcels of land which usually contained fishing or trapping rights owned by the subjugated clan.

If these conditions of retribution were met as laid down by established law, then the score of honour was considered wiped clean. These stringent demands, if paid, usually impoverished a clan, but they sustained their name as that of honourable men.

The other alternative was cruel in its implication. A man of the same rank as the slain nobleman either offered himself, or was designated by the leaders of the overthrown clan to be held as a hostage, pending further deliberation. If the captors chose to kill him, then the indebtedness was automatically wiped out. The captive nobleman, knowing that his clan could not meet the obligation, could offer to make the supreme sacrifice - thus cancelling the liability, and be evermore revered in tales of glory by his clansmen, and at the same time winning the respect of his opponents. That in turn would hold his crest in high esteem by recognizing that he held honour above his life. The decision of putting him to death or keeping him alive rested with his captors. By keeping him alive, he was a living collateral for the terms demanded, and his clan must pay the full indemnity for his release.

In this state of bondage all rank was stripped from him. While not treated as a menial, the conquerors tolerated him because of the potential wealth he represented. If, however, the indebted clan had exhausted every means to raise the compensation and found that they could not pay the set price, they came to the victors with their paddles on their shoulders to signify that they could not meet their part of the bargain, and by doing so were forced to accept the mark of the Paddle Brand. It was a chilling sight to the captive nobleman, as he knew that from that day forward he and his clan would be known as Algwa, a fate regarded as a shameful degradation to dishonour and ruin.

Free men could paddle anywhere, but those marked with the Algwa stain had to receive permission from the faction that they were indebted to before they could travel

anywhere. The nobility lost their caste and rank. They wore no longer consulted as their opinion carried no weight. Normally, the ranking classes married their equivalent in other crests, but as long as they were tainted with the Paddle Brand, marriage was impossible within that rank. The first born son of the chief's sister was the hereditary successor to the chieftainship, but this nephew was never referred to in regard to that high office as long as the Brand was upon them. The line was considered potentially dead. They were forbidden to erect Gaa-Gungais or give feasts. The crowning glory of an old chief was to erect a totem pole and give a lavish banquet to proclaim the deeds of he and his ancestors. As long as this dreaded curse was on them, nothing of this nature was allowed. If the conquered clan wanted to go any distance for hunting or fishing, they first had to receive permission from their conquerors, and then perhaps they were granted a limited time of absence. The ill-fated faction lived virtually one step above slavery. The severity of these implacable terms usually demoralized a clan into eventual complete obscurity and shame, from which they never recovered.

As long as this ignominious tarnish of honour on any clan existed, they or their future descendants were automatically barred evermore from entering the ranks of a secret society. Even today among the remnants of the once proud Sea Lords of the North, the word Algia is bandied around foolishly by those who do not know its implication. Old customs and traditions die hard, as these former sea wolves have jumped from the stone age to the steel age in less than a century, and their ancient laws haunt them still.

The secret society leaders very carefully scrutinized into the selected candidate's "family tree", as any defect, however small, would eliminate his entry into the ominous fraternity. When the young man's background was found to be acceptable, his private life was searched into with microscopic thoroughness. The pattern of his life was reconstructed from boyhood to the present day. He was picked from a family that was noted for

their courage an honour. The chosen candidate was assessed personally for bravery, ability and soundness of judgment.

A necessary quality for every man belonging to the group was silence. Each member was sworn to secrecy and never to reveal the ramifications of the organization. Enticement to keep his lips sealed meant death, as there was no second chance. He conveniently 'died', and the manner of his passing was not inquired into by members of his family. Thus, a strict shroud of secrecy was built around them so that even today very little is known about them, and their methods, because no one outside was informed. They were never a large body of men, but kept to a small tight exclusive circle.

Once a man's personal history and background was established, and accepted to the satisfaction of the inner council leaders, he was then taken to their secret lodge deep in the forest. The exact location of the lodge was known only to the members. This was not only a headquarters for their conclaves, but also a storehouse for their paraphernalia of dancing costumes and ceremonial masks. These theatrical trappings played a part in convincing the people of their supernatural gifts.

The future member of the society now had to undergo certain tests to assure his entry. He was shown the lodge, but not permitted to enter at that time. The first act was to strip off all his clothes. This symbolized that the body must be cleansed of all human impurities and contact. His body was then washed in a nearby stream, or with the heavy dew in the forest. After this was done, a few - possibly three members of the organization, disappeared into the forest with him for a period of about ten days or more.

During this initial test he was not permitted to drink water or partake of food. The reason for this was to gauge his capacity for self-control and endurance. The power of mind over body was one of the greatest virtues, in their eyes, that one could possess. The candidate was closely observed at all times for any wakening of will-power. His companions extolled the glories of being chosen to be admitted to such a powerful organi-

zation, provided one had the necessary qualifications. They would eat and drink with relish before his hungry eyes, but the candidate would give no indication of hunger or thirst, as such a sign might jeopardize his position. He knew that his every action would be weighed and considered. The secret society leaders concluded that anyone who drank copiously or ate to a point of being overgrossed was completely lacking in the fundamentals of will power. Thus, if one could not exercise his control by curbing the desire for the necessary sustenance of life for a limited time, he was judged as lacking the vital quality that was required to admit him.

Having passed the first phase of his initiation, he was then introduced to the secondary stage. In this trial he ate specially prepared food, and selected herbs that were known to contain purging powers. This indicated that the body must be pure inside as well as outside, so as to receive and absorb the spiritual powers that the secret society members were purported to contain purging powers. This indicated that the body must be hampered that he would be endowed with supernatural powers through the influence and guidance of the already such endowed men. After sufficient time had elapsed to recover from the diet, he was sent out into the wilderness on his own. Thus alone, deep in the woods and unclothed, he was ready to receive the mysterious powers that would set him as a man apart.

After many days of terrific mental concentration and physical self-denial, he would come back to the lodge as if in a trance. He would interpret his transformation by means of a series of dances and songs - that would have special significance to the members of the secret society. In the light of the flickering fire, these impassive countenanced men watched stoically, and listened attentively as the novice whirled in a passionate frenzy of dancing, at the same time composing songs that indicated his infusion with the spirits that revealed themselves to him in his lonely hours of seeking them. The leaders listened for a particular sound, that to them would

signify that the novice did establish heavenly contact. This unusual sound that the secret ones sought was the whistle of Scam-Sou, a rarely seen bird. The whistle of this bird indicated strongly a communication with another world. The candidate would continue to express his interpretations of the purported heavenly contact till the inner council leaders were satisfied that his secondary trial met with their approval. The exhausted man was then carried away to recover from this high tensioned ordeal of physical and mental effort.

A probationary period of about a month followed before he was called for his third and final test.

This third test was grim in its finality. The selected recruit was clothed in the hide of Skilla - the long-nosed bear that inhabited the islands at that time, and were noted for their ferocity in facing any odds. For the first time he was permitted the honour of entering the secret lodge. The doorway was an oval shaped entrance cut out of a base of a huge cedar carved totem pole. This design was to ever remind all men of their entrance into the world through the womb of a woman. The walls inside were covered with masks and costumes of all sorts. He recognized the stark mask of death, called Tia the Killer. This deity presides over death by violence and appears to, or is heard by those who are about to die in the fury of battle, or are slain by the cold hand of murder. The masks of the Great Hial-Lunga, or Thunderbird, and the deadly Rayon Leonod down at him. He saw the jars that contained the urine of bears and the blood of menstruant women. These were kept on hand so that when the inner councillors wanted to speak and not let the ears of the supernatural beings hear, they would open the jars because the supernatural spirits were unable to bear the odor and would depart.

The mask of Nan-Gui-Gaos caught his eye and he shuddered at the meaning of it. Should any man prove careless or heedless in his speech, or hold the secret society up to ridicule, this mask was placed before his lodge as a warning that if he did not change his thinking, the spirits would cause him to disappear forever. One warning was enough! Looking up, he saw carved on

the ceiling of the lodge a multitude of stars, which were symbols of the doors through which good spirits passed when they paddled their canoes to the great Land of Light. Around the room were scattered little baskets of charcoal. This charcoal was rubbed on the lips by a speaker immediately, if he had spoken anything at which the spirits might be offended. His action signified to them that no disrespect was intended.

He noted an uncovered jar of earth which he knew would be covered when the society members did not want the earth to see what they were doing. Colorful Chilkat blankets of exquisite design, wrought from the fierce warriors of Alaska, adorned the walls, and there were ornate ceremonial robes made from the hide of Sle-que, the land otter, whose soft silky fur was held in high esteem for trade value.

Many other objects caught his wondering eyes as he was led to a solitary seat beside the fire. He was bade to sit down and face the entire assemblage, who were seated across the fire from him. They sat in rows according to rank. Hour after hour slipped by till the lodge became dark and smoky, lit only by the fitful flickering of the fire. In the silence of the murky cedar lodge, the candidate could hear the jumping of his erratic heart beat, as the thoughts of the next ordeal flashed in his mind.

Almost imperceptible the inner council leader nodded his head, and instantly four members jumped to do his bidding. From the confines of another small room they brought forth a covered slab and laid it before the selected aspirant. This done, they quietly resumed their seats. The candidate stared unseeingly straight ahead, with pounding heart and dry mouth. Slowly the leader stood up, and from the folds of his robe brought out a long finely honed stone knife of granitic rock. He spoke quietly, "O Noble Chosen One, you have done well and the Mighty Beings are pleased. They have told me - here is a man of measure and worthy of the honour of being a member in this organization." He paused, "With this implement of destruction, I command you to

consume what lies hidden under the blanket. There is not turning back now; when you accept this knife you accede to my demand without question, and when I am satisfied that you have fulfilled what is expected of you then you will become a member of our illustrious company - a man your clan history will mark apart.

Take the knife!"

Slowly the chosen one took the proffered knife, and with tumultuous heart carefully drew the blanket aside. A gasp of involuntary horror welled up in him. The body of an enemy warrior that had been slain in battle lay before him. A deep revulsion seized him, coupled with a strong desire to flee that staring corpse and the inscrutable eyes of his watchers. For a hand even to touch a dead body was considered revolting and unclean. To think he must go further than just to desecrate his person by touching it, he must defile his body by devouring it. All the deep-rooted instincts in him cried out against such depravity of his being. In spinning mental turmoil his eyes sought blindly the unreadable faces of his mentors, only to encounter stony stares and a bleakness of men as they watched his reactions. Summoning his fast waning courage he plunged the knife into an arm and hacked it was a desperate frenzy. with shuddering breath and revolting stomach, he started to chew and swallow the flesh with a nauseating loathing, and all the time his mind screamed at him - "Carriion, carriion, carriion!"

With a desperation born of necessity to succeed, he continued his grisly feast. No sign for him to stop came from the impassive faced leader, as all the glittering eyes of the assembled members beheld his degradation. Finally the leader held up his hand and snapped out, "Salt water." Immediately two members jumped up and seized the nearly gibbering man to carry him outside. They forced down his throat as much sea water as he could stand, then bade him spew out everything, and the man needed no more prompting. Retching up all he had consumed he continued drinking alternately fresh and salt water till he was certain that no more of his "feast" remained in him. At last, pale but shaken, he was led back into the lodge of horror. Upon entering he perceived a different atmosphere, almost a festive mood. The corpse was gone, and a cheerier fire

brightened the room.

The leader and his followers were still seated, as though awaiting his re-entrance, and he stood before them expectantly. The leader looked at him a long time and said, "My council and I have decided that you are indeed worthy of the honour of being with us. You have mastered the most arduous tests that are designed to tax the hardest of strong nerved men. When each one of us touch our hand on your shoulder then truly you shall become as we are now. As a dreaded member of our Invincible organization, all people will hold you in awe and fear. From this day forward you shall tread the path of destiny with us. You know well the price for betraying our trust. My brother, hold your head high and look now at your equals." With that the Leader was the first to touch his shoulder, and all followed suit.

When they were finished, the pale faced newly made member addressed them, "It is indeed an honour to be accepted by this illustrious company. I shall never fail you as long as the waves wash the beaches and the sun rises on our mighty island. I will defend to the death the secrets that this organization entrusts to me." Thus, he entered with these words a phase of life that he never before knew existed.

During the long months that followed he was still regarded as a novice. The many intricate dances that were employed to appease the various deities were taught to him. He learned the dances that commemorated each season in their order. Hand in hand with the dances went songs that suited the occasion.

The many Deities that were paid tribute included the Controller of the Seasons, the sun, moon, stars, wind, earth, the tides, and the seas. If they wanted a fair wind to cross the water, the Power that controlled the wind and sea was approached in the form of a dance and a song proclaiming the greatness of the Deities. At the height of their activities, the rite of scattering the down of a rare species of duck over the water was carried out. In this way they appealed to the Powers, and at the same time acknowledged that they were at the mercy of a power

greater than they possessed. The general medium of transmitting their offerings was by fire. The disappoaring smoke was regarded as the connecting link between their material world and the Great Beyond. The secret society men reasoned that a mighty Chieft, whom they named Sha-La-Na, or Chief of Light, and the Upper Land, was the Master Controller living high in the heavens in a dazzling lodge.

As the novice became more endowed by his new status, the measure of his endowment was revealed by his ability to compose songs and dances of his own. Often he went on long journeys into the forest and fasted for a given length of time. This period was known as 'chewing the days', as he could not take food while on a fast, and at the same time would learn to exercise a spartan self control.

He gradually became fully acquainted with all the dances and their meanings. They were relentlessly drilled into him so that in time he could execute them with flawless precision. These dances were controlled by a head dancer, who indicated the steps by the pitch in his voice. He learned to handle the heavy masks on his head and manipulate the cleverly hidden draw-strings that controlled the jaws of the various carved animal or bird heads. Physically, they maintained themselves in perfect condition to withstand the gruelling hours of performance that was expected of them.

Among the secrets that were revealed to him was the 'corpse' that he ate. First, soft edible roots were dug up and pounded into a kind of mush, then it was moulded around a human skeleton. After they finished simulating a human body on a skeleton, the corpse was carefully baked to a deep brown, and to all intents and purposes represented a human body. The salt water was taken immediately afterwards to help spew up the doughy substance just in case the bones did have some contamination. This is one of the major reasons secret societies were feared so much, because if they ate human bodies they were considered capable of doing anything. The newly elected man's mind was immensely relieved by this information.

The final test of these long months of training came when he made his first debut in public. The leader would single him out to give a solo performance so that all might see his interpretations of being visited by the supernatural beings while 'chewing the days'. This solo performance marked his complete acceptance into that fraternity which loft its mark deep in the history of the Haida nation.

The basis on which these secret societies were founded, was that they created the belief of their being endowed with extraordinary powers - bordering on the edge of being supernatural. Through this idea, which was planted deep in the minds of the populace, they commanded fear from their enemies as well as their own people. This fear was based on a deep dread, because of what they were capable of doing. Psychologically, the idea of secret societies was well conceived. The Haida aristocrats were naturally protected by their blood, as their entire social structure was governed by rank. The nobility who comprised the secret societies had enormous power and prestige - and who dared challenge their authority? Were they not the leaders of their clans? Their position was similar to that of the ancient Caesars, they could do no wrong, and those that questioned them were simply disposed of. On the other hand, many of these men composed the Government or the councils of the village.

Consequently, through their influence they instilled into the people a high degree of aggressiveness, so that even today on this far-flung coastline of British Columbia in quiet bays and river mouths, one can find rotting remnants of cedar lodges and decaying bones that marked the murderous forays of those audacious marauders in their ceaseless quest for loot and slaves. Some small villages on the coast today owe their size to the assaults of these bold sea lords in their swift raids of conquest.

These raids, and the terror that was inspired by those fearless raiders, were primarily engineered by the men of the secret societies whose main purpose was to divide and conquer the other Indian tribes wherever they were found.

Thus another era has vanished from the face of the earth, but is still within memory of a few aged Indians living in their villages, and who remember the depredations of these Golden Sea Lords.

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